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# ***A History of Everyday Things in England: Illustrators of mid-twentieth-century social history books***

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## **Abstract**

The illustrated books considered in this article present histories of every day life and align with the genre of history writing that had existed at least since the nineteenth century, of women documenting the domestic sphere, challenging the hegemonic and dominant narratives of history and presenting 'Englishness' instead within the practices and objects of the everyday. The use of illustrations to evoke empathy, describe the detail of ordinary lives and offer graphic interpretations of data shows an engagement with the pedagogical possibilities of visual literacy in schoolbooks, allied to developments in the state school system at the time. The books demonstrate a variety of approaches towards the function of illustration in textbooks for children. These approaches include presenting 'picturesque' narratives, promoting imaginative empathy through the use of contemporaneous visual source material, and encouraging critical thinking through pattern recognition in the assessment of information graphics. The article considers the visual mode in each book and maps its production onto social, political and ideological contexts of mid-twentieth-century England, offering feminist perspectives on the notion of history writing, scholarship and pedagogy.

## **Keywords**

print culture

history writing,

illustration

popular scholarship

social history

modernism

feminist histories

isotype

There are several framing interests to this article, in which I will be considering a set of highly illustrated social history books produced between 1918 and 1948 that were written for children and produced for the mass market and that make effective use of illustration to communicate ideas about history. I am particularly interested in forms of populist scholarship enabled by print media, specifically in mapping the contribution of mid-twentieth-century women to the cultural history of the period as writers, illustrators and designers. The 'Women in Print' network and events that I convene and facilitate are a part of this. The network exists to evaluate and celebrate the work of under-represented women in the history of twentieth-century print culture through a series of public events that include scholars, artists and family members, which we hope will generate alternative histories for the cultural production of that era (McCannon 2016).<sup>1</sup>

I am also very interested in the idea of the illustrator as scholar, not least because I am trying to be one myself. As an illustrator and an academic I am constantly trying to locate the ways in which bridges can be built between creative practice and academic practice. So in this article I look to women such as Marjorie Quennell and Dorothy

Hartley as mentors in this endeavour, as such women both wrote and illustrated their own books.

Third, I am interested in considering the cultural agency of illustration when viewed through the lens of print culture – that is, seeing the illustrator, author, publisher, bookseller and audience as a part of a nexus creating and shifting cultural debates, in which print is the catalyst for what Catherine Brace (2001) calls ‘the exchange and popular diffusion of ideas’, and where print becomes ‘an agent of change’ (Eisenstein [1979](#)). The understanding of print as a cultural technology necessitates interdisciplinary study. The paratextual dimensions of a book, the materiality of its production, and the political and cultural contexts within which it is conceived are all important elements in understanding the significance of print in given historical contexts.

In evaluating the ways in which the books I discuss below contributed to history writing I will highlight a shift in emphasis away from highly determined nationalistic narratives towards generating visibility and popular interest in the ordinary lives of everyday people of the past. The books I have chosen to represent this are the following: Marjorie and Charles Quennell’s [\(1918-34\)](#) *A History of Everyday Things in England* [London: Batsford](#) Dorothy Hartley and Margaret Elliot’s [\(1929\)](#), *Life and Work of the People of England*, [London: Batsford](#), Amabel Williams Ellis’ [\(1947\)](#), *A History of English Life* [London: Methuen](#), and Otto and Marie Neurath’s work for the publishing house Max Parrish during the 1940s. I have selected this set because they each use illustration in very distinct and different ways to present historical narratives. These books were produced for the mass market by publishers such as

Batsford and Methuen, and were produced in response to a need for school textbooks after successive education bills in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the establishment of public (i.e. state) schools in England.

Before this time, education had been a very different undertaking, often taking place in a domestic setting with history being taught from books such as Mrs Markham's *A History of England* (1823) and Maria Callcott's *Little Arthur's History of England* (1832) (Figure 1). These books framed the reconstruction of the national past as a dramatic historical narrative full of occasions to reinforce domestic morality, and situated the author as an amateur writing for a domestic audience. Rosemary Mitchell (2000) terms this highly visualized history writing as 'picturesque'. She argues that it was less analytic and didactic than its eighteenth-century precursors, and was instead concerned with dramatic narrative reconstruction, readerly empathy, and an 'authentic' rendering of historical surface detail.

Thus, with the nineteenth-century onset of a mass audience for print, there emerged a genre of history writing for younger audiences by women with a distinct tone: that of a mother telling her child a fireside story, and using the lessons of history to promote good behaviour as well as offering a dramatized version of 'key' events in the national past. Christina Cosby (1991:1) argues that, at this time, "history" is produced as a man's truth [...] which in turn requires that "women" be outside history' and that "'Women" are the unhistorical other of history'. She goes on to identify a trend among women historians of this time to retreat from writing 'public' political history by writing textbooks. For example, Mrs Markham's *A History of England* (1823) presented itself as an amateur work aimed at a domestic audience (Cosby 1991: 1).

Similarly, Henrietta Marshall's famous work *Our Island Story*, asks that we position it alongside *Robinson Crusoe* rather than 'serious' histories (1905, preface). Indeed, Marshall saw herself as working in a storytelling idiom rather than didactically: '... Remember, too, that I was not trying to teach you, but only to tell a story' (1905).

The illustrations for both these books reinforce dramatic moments of historical importance to make the 'story' more memorable and to make the book look like a 'story book', thus blurring distinctions between fact and folklore in the retelling of well-known tales of battles and kings. The illustrations tend to foreground a crucial and dramatic point in the narrative of the 'story' of a particular protagonist of high social rank. In the illustrations for *Little Arthur's History of England* (1832), the visual mode of the book presents history as a heroic pageant of kings and rulers.

Illustrations such as the 'King Alfred building his navy' (1832: 25) and 'King John signing the Magna Charta' (1832: 71) depict history as something that is fashioned by an aristocratic elite, and depict a world-view in which a feudal societal contract is enacted. The same compositional device is used consistently throughout the book: a central figure – usually male – is surrounded by a crowd who look to him for instruction in some way. The viewer is also invited to be a part of this crowd, contemplating the potency and agency of the historical personage who is actively involved in shaping the course of events. For instance, in the image 'William rallies the troops at Hastings' (Figure 1), William is untouched by the fighting, riding through a clear path in the battle on horseback. He is depicted in a static heroic pose, arm raised, occupying the centre of the composition and looking down at his troops, who bound him on three sides. Every eye in the crowd is fixed on him. He is shown 'rallying the troops' by presenting them with the spectacle of his power – signified in

the decorated white horse and dark chain mail that marks him out from the crowd. The ordinary rank and file are depicted as being transfixed and transformed by his presence, thus encoding the hegemonic ideology of his 'right to rule' in the illustration.

With the establishment of more 'public' schools after the 1918 education act in Britain, there was a subsequent market for school textbooks that were working in a more 'public' tone of voice. One such example is Marjorie and Charles Quennell's series *A History of Everyday Things in England*. The Quennells jointly authored and illustrated this series of books written for children and published by Batsford between 1918 and 1934, which traces a sense of national identity read out from objects of daily use and the customs that accrue to them. It is concerned with the minutiae of 'everyday life' (Highmore 2002) and offers an alternative reading of national culture to books such as *Our Island Story* (1905) that privilege the heroic and exceptional exploits of the (often male) elite.

For instance, the depiction of domestic scenes (Figure 2) show children playing, while other illustrations, such as of a 'Solar, or Withdrawing Room' (Figure 3), depict scenes of domestic tranquility, almost lassitude, which create a distinctly different narrative setting for re-imagined historical events than the heroic picturesque narrative mode of Callcott's and Markham's books. Alongside narrative illustrations, a great many of the images depict interiors, plans and elevations of buildings (Charles Quennell was an architect). Additionally, there is a pattern of presenting typologies of dress throughout the books, where a parade of figures float in white space, modelling the fashions of the time.

By focusing their narrative on the objects of daily use – the ways homes have been created, hearths lit, clothes made, food eaten, toys played with – the Quennells were foregrounding what Rita Felski positions as a feminine domain of history: the home and process of making the private sphere; the culturation of private life (1999: 17), which, before the twentieth century, had mainly been seen as ‘unworthy of the title of true history’ (Woolf 1997: 646). Woolf, in his study of gender and the nature of historical knowledge, states that during the period associated with the ascent of print, 1500–1800, women came to be excluded from participation in ‘mainstream historical writing [...] which meant political or military history’. He makes the case, however, that women ‘regularly subverted’ this through writing in other genres such as autobiography and biography, ‘two literary forms within which women could write themselves into history at the very time they were being written out by men’ (Woolf 1997). The Quennells can be seen as participating in this lineage of history writing – both in their dramatization of everyday life within the literary form of the illustrated picture book and in their interest in representing the minutiae of lives that had gone unrecorded in previous versions of the past.

The Quennells’ books were wildly successful, as can be seen from a segment from a pamphlet that the secretary of the Royal Society of Teachers produced in the 1930s praising the Quennells’ focus on the ‘lives and doings of ordinary men and women’ over stories of ‘dynasties, wars and conquests’:

The ever-widening scope of historical research has opened many different fields of study. We have to-day many ‘histories’ – ancient, modern, political,



social, local, economic, religious or literary, with countless specialised branches such as the history of architecture, of shipping, of games, localities or buildings. Amid this vast and ill-ordered mass of facts, all falling under the general title 'history,' some guidance must be given to the young student. Lacking a coherent thread or clue he may be engulfed in confusion, unable to see the wood for the trees. (Roscoe [1936] 1938)

The 'thread' the Quennells chose to pursue was what today we call 'social history': the lives and doings of ordinary people, or what E. P. Thompson termed 'history from below' (1966: 279–80).

Nationalist narratives during the early twentieth century were enthusiastically disseminated through the burgeoning publishing industry at the time, creating a print culture that led to the popularization of a particular version of England and Englishness (Brace 2001) at this time. Brace goes on to say:

the publisher is at once the member of a profession and the dealer in a commercial trade, shaping popular taste and dispensing knowledge. [...] The publishers' social function is to mediate between intellectuals and society by producing an economically viable mechanism for the exchange and popular diffusion of ideas. (Brace 2001: 289)

This offers a useful model for thinking about how illustration can be seen to have cultural relevance – as a part of a nexus of cultural agents using print or mass media to participate in the popular diffusion of ideas. The books can perhaps be said to be a

part of a wider cultural turn towards an interest in auto-ethnography, what Tom Harrison termed the 'anthropology of ourselves', referring to the Mass Observation movement during the 1930s. Another example of this 'turn' would be the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) exhibition of *Everyday Things* in 1936, which presented modernist innovations in objects of daily use (such as flat irons and teapots) as examples of progressive and socially useful design (Anderson 1936). Ethnography is predicated on the telling of stories, and the kinds of stories we tell ourselves determine who we think we are. At this point in time the foregrounding of narratives of ordinary life, such as in the image of the 'Solar, or withdrawing room' (Figure 3), which shows a peaceful, everyday scene of children playing while their mother sews, can be seen as a part of the desire to create egalitarian and utopian grand narratives that focus on the practicalities of rebuilding the country after World War I.

Contributing to this is a strong narrative of the *usefulness* of history running through the Quennells' books. The past is important as a kind of storehouse of useful knowledge – seen in an illustration of the child protagonist admiring the workings of a water mill (Figure 4). It is presented as a dramatic moment in the daily life of the child – the mother looking for him as he plays near the mill. The illustration uses a well-worn picture book trope of embedding a protagonist that the reader can imaginatively become, building empathy into the narrative. The object of his interest, however, is something practical, an example of engineering. The Quennells made this point explicitly in their preface to the books:

The Great War has meant terrible destruction, and will invariably be followed by a

period of construction. There is a new spirit abroad; we all want to make the world a better place to live in, with wider co-opportunities and greater consideration for good citizens.

[...] People will demand a well ordered existence in which they can do useful and interesting work, not necessarily just for themselves, but including some service for others. To the boys and girls who are in our public schools today will be given opportunities which no other generation has ever had, and it is of the greatest importance as the moment that they should be trained to do useful work and learn to use their hands. Before they can become constructors or craftsmen [...] they must obtain a good store of knowledge lay hold of tradition, so they can benefit by what has been done [...]. (Quennell and Quennell 1933)

The Quennells are keen to stress the usefulness of the past, and to convey a sense of the importance of work in people's daily lives, ideologically positioning the reader so that they identify with being useful themselves, saying,

the boys and girls for whom we write will know that we are mainly concerned with showing people at work, and that it does not matter what the work is so long as it is interesting – and we might add if work is natural and proper then it cannot be uninteresting. (Quennell and Quennell 1933)

The idea that you can learn from the past by studying the accoutrements of everyday life, offering up 'history' in terms of practical lessons for making and doing, runs

through the books. For instance, as well as the image of a boy studying the workings of a water mill, there are various images of gears, bolts and fastenings, including the workings of a windmill, and patterns for clothing are shown – deconstructing the material remains of history in order to understand it thoroughly (Quennell and Quennell 1933: 109, 124–29, 197).

The Quennells thus often conflate the idea of ‘tradition’ with ‘industriousness’, and their focus is on human ingenuity rather than on narratives of ritualized power. In the preface to the 1918 edition, showing their belief in the idea of inherited knowledge being a characteristic aspect of nationality, they state: ‘All this accumulated knowledge was handed down from generation to generation and formed what we call tradition, and it resulted in the work being extraordinarily truthful... like a strong tree, deeply rooted in the past, always growing’.

This approach of using history as a storehouse of useful knowledge, to be repurposed by the industrious, can also be seen in Dorothy Hartley’s *Medieval Costume and Life* (1931, reissued in 2003).

Hartley, who wrote and illustrated her own books, used primary visual sources a great deal in her research. In this book the illustrations deconstruct the primary source material and offer practical instruction on how to make the clothes, with careful line drawings deconstructing the elements of dress, and the author also appears in photographs wearing reconstructions of the clothes, often posing in the same posture as seen in original manuscript illustration (Figures 5–6). The book insists on the material presence of the past: Hartley says in the foreword in support of

this resourceful and performative methodology that '[...] we shall but imperfectly apprehend the true inwardness of many events and personalities as long as we are unable to visualise them in their proper habit and surroundings' (1931).

What is especially interesting here is her reliance on contemporaneous illustrations from manuscripts and engravings as a primary source of research material. Her transmutation of this visual evidence into the costumes themselves can be seen as a performative methodology that uses drawing (her instructional diagrams) as a way of understanding history empathically. Her performance of the past is an exercise in *becoming* the knowledge she seeks to understand. She does this by wearing the clothes and imagining what it would be like *to be* one of these people and thereby experiencing the material conditions of everyday life within historical contexts. Thus, the reader can view the illustrations as a source of historical information that is creative and imaginative as well as scholarly. Hartley's methodology as a historian is an experiment in haptic antiquarian scholarship blended with pageantry; her approach can be seen as blending creative and critical approaches to the subject of history, connecting intellectual analysis and careful scholarship with empathic, performative models of understanding. I would like to position this as a feminist endeavour in what Felski frames the 'task for feminist theory' – that is, 'to connect [...] rather than to sever' theories of knowledge (2002: 26).

In her six-volume *Life and Work of the Peoples of England: A Pictorial Record From Contemporary Sources* (1929), Hartley, with her co-author Margaret Elliot, used another illustrative methodology, in which they presented an annotated visual essay using historical pictorial documents with permission from the British Library, such as

a set of images relating to coach travel (Figure 7), to present a vivid picture of historical conditions of daily life. She states that ‘the object of this series is to give a view of the social life of each century *through the eyes* of the people who lived in it’ (Hartley and Elliot 1929: iii, original emphasis). An artist herself, she appreciated the unique perspective and interpretation that illustration can provide, and in presenting this rich juxtaposition of scenes she offers these micro-narratives as a window into the past, requiring the reader to imaginatively attend to and respond to the images (Figure 8).

Using illustration in this way to ask children to imaginatively time travel and ‘see through the eyes’ of the people who lived in former centuries was an innovative, image-rich approach to pedagogy at this time, one that privileged the graphic output of each era as a direct and understandable link to the past. Sadly, the books were not enthusiastically received in schools. Hartley and Elliot state in the preface to *The Life and Work of the Peoples of England*:

From opinions received we think that beyond doubt the illustrations of Social History from the contemporary graphic art of the period treated has been of great value and interest to a number of persons; but we do not think that teachers as a whole are unanimously sympathetic with these contemporary representations. We cannot help feeling that the contemporary pictures represent the life of a period in a manner unsurpassed for vivid interpretation, graphic power and wealth of detail. The subjects also have in most cases greater artistic vigour and value than any modern transcripts, and we feel that

teachers should accustom themselves to study, enjoy and make use of them.

(Hartley and Elliot 1929, preface)

One possibility is that the books met with a lack of success in schools because of teaching methods that privileged text-based approaches to learning. However, Hector Bolitho, writing the 'biography' of the publishing house Batsford in 1943, pinpointed the 'undigested' nature of the material as a potential problem. It was not the use of illustrations themselves but the level of complexity that the contemporaneous engravings contained. He says of the books:

Its results to us and a fairly large circle were stimulating, instructive and informative, but the curious aloofness of the English race to many forms of the graphic arts came decidedly into play, and it was found that teachers especially were far less attracted to medieval manuscripts and eighteenth century engravings than by the Quennells' drawn version of such material; they preferred their stuff pre-digested. (Bolitho 1943: 54–55)

Despite the poor reception in schools, and the eclectic choice of visual material to represent 'Englishness', Hartley and Elliot's approach to assembling textbooks is notable because of the way it champions the quotidian in the lives of people in the past. *The Life and Work of the Peoples of England* (1929) is organized in a way that creates taxonomies that cut through the epochs with radically different emphasis on the lists of 'significant dates and heroic exploits' that might make up a more top-down historiographical approach. Hartley says in the 1929 edition:

We have been able to get a number of subjects illustrated right through the four centuries; among these we can mention Baking, Bee-keeping, Glass-making, the Baby Carriage, Blood Letting and the delightful Birth scenes. In this volume (17tc) we have included briefly the sources from which the engravings or drawings have been drawn. (Hartley and Elliot 1929 v)

But their endeavour to depict a typical nationalist narrative was hampered by the lack of quality and quantity of English engravings pre-nineteenth century. The author remarked, 'we must emphasize that England's contribution to the graphic art before the nineteenth century was so meagre as to render it impossible to give a representative collection from pictures produced in these islands alone' (1928: v). This necessitated forays into other cultures to present a more impressionistic rather than strictly factual version of life in England at these times.

As with Hartley's other scholarly writing, there is a briskness to the prose that does not want to be hampered by tying facts, quotations or sources down. She is concerned with painting a vivid picture for the reader, writing and choosing illustrations with a popular audience in mind, at pains to be lively. The focus on the manners and customs of the everyday lives of ordinary people through analysing material culture represented in contemporaneous images has an affinity to an antiquarian approach to history writing (Battles 2008) that uses 'evidence' with 'imagination and feeling' to respond to the past. Battles equates this with what she calls the 'antiquarian impulse' in literary and scholarly writing about the past, and describes the way 'antiquarianism resists grand narratives in favour of the localized topographical history'. She further demonstrates how antiquarianism becomes characterized and



even ridiculed as an 'inappropriate form of historical curiosity' by the emerging professional field of historical scholarship (see also Myrone and Pelz 1999), and looks at the ways in which antiquarianism 'comes to be viewed as lacking authority, usefulness, and taste in its methodologies'. The empathic and imaginative flights of fancy that the antiquarian is believed to indulge in push against the limits at which the past ceases to be legible in Battles' analysis, and thus becomes a source of anxiety about how history should be known, represented and rendered into narrative. Hartley and Elliot's re-presentation of the past as a collage of images with supporting text can be seen as participating in this alternative genre of history writing.

The aim of the book to use illustration as primary teaching material to activate the visual cortex in storing information about historical lives still appears strikingly original. Like Hartley's previous work in re-presenting medieval costume, it seeks to blend the presentation of historical material with an empathic and imaginative approach to studying everyday lives of the past, and uses illustration as the conduit for this type of understanding.

I would like to turn now to another collaborative project, between the writers Amabel Williams-Ellis and F. J. Fisher, with illustrations by Wilma Hickson, for a textbook titled *A History of English Life – Political and Social* (1937). In the foreword the authors state their aims as follows:

The authors have tried, all through this history, to keep two points before the reader. First, to show in each age how ordinary families, the mass of English people, lived. The second point they have specifically tried to bring out is the

progress made in science, art and invention and the way in which each discovery grew out the needs and ideas of its own age and in turn changed the life of the generations that came after. (Williams-Ellis and Fisher 1937)

This book develops the idea of cataloguing the ‘lives and doings of ordinary people’ (Williams-Ellis and Fisher 1937) and, as well as encouraging empathy in its narrative, begins to offer models for the analysis of social and political forces that affected societal change. As a result of this emphasis, the authors warned that ‘some of the more familiar historical events and persons have had to be written of rather more briefly than they are in most histories’ (Williams-Ellis and Fisher 1937).

There are several interesting things about the way that illustration is used here. Wilma Hickson, who created the images for the book and its cover, says in the ‘illustrator’s note’ in the foreword that ‘though some of the pictures in this book might be called “imaginary” I have tried as far as possible to suggest the style of drawing suitable to the age it represents’ (Figure 9). The interpretation of historical ‘sources’ is again transformed by the antiquarian mode of ‘imagination and feeling’ of the illustrator and woven into the visual register of a ‘style of drawing’ – a methodology close to Hartley’s direct use of visual sources – which encourages the development of a visual literacy akin to a graphical historical sensibility.

The book contains quite a lot of rather confusing charts and diagrams. The ‘transformation’ of data in various charts and tables is a departure from the pictorial modes seen in the earlier ‘picturesque’ narrative illustration of Mrs Markham’s books, and in the Quennells’ illustration of material culture. Hickson’s diagrams blend the

two approaches with a quasi-modernist simplicity, reducing the detail in the illustrations, and perhaps also referencing Marie Neurath's books for children that incorporate the Isotype system (acronym for International System of Typographic Picture Education). Isotype was a nascent form of information graphics developed by Marie and husband Otto Neurath that utilized simplified iconic symbols and colours to represent social data with the aim of creating an international language of images (discussed below).

Isotype-like visual languages were in tune with a shift towards new theories in education at the time, such as Susan Isaac's pioneering child-centred theories of educational development based on Froebel's models of active learning (1932); a 1943 white paper commissioned by the wartime coalition government emphasizing 'Educational Reconstruction' and advocating the adoption of diverse teaching methods that promote egalitarianism<sup>2</sup>; and Marion Richards' 1948 book *Art and the Child*, which promoted the use of visual and haptic learning in schools, which, along with her work as a school inspector in London in the 1930s, promoted practical and modern approaches to art and design pedagogy embedded in the curriculum.

Hickson's 'transformations' of data into diagrams tend to contain characters rather than typologies and to betray a number of ideological positions, not least an androcentric idea of cultural and evolutionary progress, demonstrated in an iconic representation comparing a 'caveman' to an 'Eton schoolboy' that is almost a caricature of cultural evolutionism (Figure 10).

A particularly hard-to-read example of the visual presentation of quantitative data can be seen in Figure 11. There is a confusion between the application of an objective metric (the size of the figure relates to the number of people) and the visual convention of perspective in images. This results in the reader seeing 'the poor' as nearer to the foreground of the picture. The confusion in reading the image as a narrative illustration rather than as a statistical chart is also inferred in the dynamic posture and detailed drawing of each of the characters chosen to represent sectors of the economy. Although it does draw upon its innovative use of imagery to communicate complex data sets, it does not have the clarity of the stripped-back aesthetic of the Isotype system. In another diagram, the head of each kneeling monk denotes a monastery (Figure 12). The attempt to create a characterized icon is fussy and detracts from an accurate reading of the locations. In both examples the visual presentation militates against the clear understanding of the data by including too much extraneous detail.

Finally, I would like to consider a series of history books designed by Otto and Marie Neurath, émigré designers of the aforementioned Isotype system from Vienna, who settled in Britain in the 1930s. Isotype involved creating charts and diagrams to present quantitative data that utilized pared-down icons in multiples, with further concepts differentiated through a similarly utilitarian and purposeful use of colour. Neurath, in a set of typewritten notes compiled with the educational psychologist Joseph Lauwerys, states that 'comparison is to be the backbone of all the sets of Isotype charts'; and that 'All charts should be made so that, even without a teacher's guidance children may understand the main points' (Neurath and Neurath in Walker 2012: 347).

The *Visual History* was the first children's book series that Otto and Marie Neurath worked on while they were based in Oxford. The project began with the setting up of an editorial committee in March 1944 to oversee the production of textbooks for use in schools, and involved Lauwerys, among others. Their approach to understanding history was grounded in offering the child reader ways of making connections through clearly designed visual icons and symbols. The pedagogical objective is less about conveying individual narratives or representing the grand narratives of a particular national identity than it is about conceptualizing the elements that make up social change. Walker, in her study of the work of Otto and Marie Neurath in developing a new educational model for thinking about and presenting children with historical concepts, describes the series as

not a chronological historical narrative punctuated by kings and queens, battles and ceremonies. Rather it looked at the past through the lens of everyday activities, such as 'How Clothes have Changed' (in Book 2), 'Making Light' (in Book 1) and 'Travelling on Land' (in Book 3), and the impact that such activity might have on a community, country or world. (Walker 2012)

The visual language employed is that of charts and data, of scientific rationalism pared down to constituent concepts and visual elements. It is antithetical to the empathic, narrative illustrations of the Quennells, in that, instead of *encouraging* the child to imagine the historical conditions of everyday life, the illustrations *invite* the child to make connections and see patterns in the information, and to privilege calculation over empathy. The message is that the subject of history is concerned

with human progress, change and improvement rather than heroic exploits. The shift in emphasis in the Isotype books moved the content away from the nationalist towards a forging of internationalist models of understanding social history. The Neuraths' desire was to create an 'international' picture language, and so their presentation of relative cultural material responds to broad social concepts, rather than depicting political events. This can be seen as part of a Left-leaning internationalist agenda aligned to the aesthetics of modernism that prevailed in Britain during the mid-twentieth century (see Harris 2010; Kintzele 2002).

The Isotype pictograms are free-floating signifiers, literally floating in the white space of the page – contextless concepts rather than narratives. The way that the books were designed were reflective of their educational method, which was described in the books' publicity as 'the active attitude', in which 'in every case the child is required to seek information for himself, and to express answers in his own way'; and 'material will be presented not in form of single stories, but in comparative charts' (Neurath and Neurath 1948 in Walker 2012: 355). The instruction to the child in the introduction explains the method behind the clean simple illustrations:

These Isotype symbols, as the pictures are called, are always kept as simple and clear as possible, bearing in mind that each has to be recognized quickly and must be different from all the others. As a result they can be put together like the letters in a written line, to make up a story. Begin by looking at each symbol, and then at all the symbols in each line or column till you thoroughly understand the statements made. Go on like that until you have read the whole page. Then ask yourself questions and try to answer them. As examples, we

have drawn up lists of questions, many of which, we feel sure, come into your mind as you look at the page. You can certainly think of more. (Neurath and Neurath 1948 in Walker 2012: 359)

This connected approach was also intrinsic to the way the books were produced, with Marie Neurath initially working on the subject theme, identifying relationships between things and ideas, and ‘transforming’ or distilling Otto’s sketches into symbols and icons. The Neuraths then commissioned artists to produce the pictograms. The illustrations have no one single author but are produced according to a collective design aesthetic; and they manage to combine the scientific presentation of data with an attention to the visual understanding of a young audience. The images have a warmth and simplicity that is communicated in the thick linework, uncluttered layouts and easily understood iconography. For instance, in the use of historical costume to create silhouettes (Figure 13), the aim is not to gain an in-depth understanding of the detail of dress history, as both Quennell and Hartley offer in their respective illustrations, but to create shapes that act as markers for stretches of historical time. Similarly, the simply depicted modes of transport, communication devices and flying machines is offered with minimal text, and the objects are to be understood as metonymic of the technological changes in each era.

Analysing the visual rhetoric and illustrative modes through which the subject of history is presented to children in illustrated textbooks demonstrates shifting ideological standpoints inherent in the content of the illustrations and the pedagogic intentions that underpin them. Marjorie Quennell’s representation of imagined narratives encourages the reader to empathize with the daily lives of children in

previous times. Dorothy Hartley's adventurous use of historical illustration is a way of attempting to look at the past in an imaginatively engaged manner as if 'through the eyes of the people who lived it'. Wilma Hickson's illustrations attempt to offer a more analytical qualitative and scientific visual modelling of information, but are still wedded to a narrative impulse and in terms of a graphic language that is at times difficult to read. The Neuraths present the subject of history as a quasi-scientific exercise in problem-solving, using their pared-back Isotypes in an attempt to rid the narrator's voice from the telling of history.

These histories of every day life align with the genre of history writing that had existed at least since the nineteenth century in which women document the domestic sphere, challenge the hegemonic and dominant narratives of history, and present 'Englishness' instead within the practices and objects of the everyday. An interest in the visual presentation of history as a pedagogic tool is evident in a pamphlet entitled *The Improvement of Textbooks, Particularly History Textbooks*, from a UNESCO seminar in 1950 chaired by Joseph Lauwerys and entitled 'History textbooks and international understanding', in which he offers the following guidance:

for effective visualization the author must continually ask himself *why* he is using the illustration or the chart. What is the purpose of including it? What effect is intended on the learner? What connexion is there with the text?

The UNESCO initiative was part of a concerted effort to promote international 'intellectual cooperation', and the production of 'international history textbooks' intended both as models for national writers of history and for use in schools'



(Lauwerys 1950: 22). Use of illustrations such as those developed by the illustrators and writers above to evoke empathy, describe the detail of ordinary lives and offer graphic interpretations of data showed an engagement with the pedagogical possibilities of visual literacy in schoolbooks, allied to developments in the state school system 1930–1950.

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## Images

**Figure 1:** 'M.C' or Lady Maria Callcott, 'William rallies the Normans at Hastings', from  
*Little Arthur's History of England* (1832:41). No information is given about the  
identity of the illustrator, although an engraver's mark is visible in the bottom left of  
each image. Callacott was herself an illustrator, and so it is possible that she may have  
provided the original images for the book, which would have then been produced by  
professional engravers. Public domain.

**Figure 2:** Marjorie and Charles Quennell, *A History of Everyday Things in England*,  
Volume 1 (1933: 54). Public domain.

**Figure 3:** Marjorie and Charles Quennell, 'A solar or with-drawing room', from *A History of Everyday Things in England*, Volume 1 (1933: 81). Public domain.

**Figure 4:** Marjorie and Charles Quennell, 'A water mill', from *A History of Everyday Things in England*, Volume 1 (1933: 94). Public domain.

**Figure 5:** Dorothy Hartley, 'A good pattern for workers', from *Medieval Costume and Life* (1931).

**Figure 6:** Dorothy Hartley, 'Coat made from pattern on page 61...', from *Medieval Costume and Life* (1931).

**Figure 7:** Dorothy Hartley and Margaret Elliot, page from *Life and Work of the Peoples of England: A Pictorial Record From Contemporary Sources* (6 vols) (1929).

**Figure 8:** Dorothy Hartley and Margaret Elliot, page from *Life and Work of the Peoples of England: A Pictorial Record From Contemporary Sources* (6 vols) (1929).

**Figure 9:** Wilma Hickson, three interior illustrations from Amabel Williams-Ellis and F. J. Fisher, *A History of English Life – Political and Social*, 1937. Hickson's drawings have an affinity with the historical period they depict.

**Figure 10:** Wilma Hickson, diagram showing the size of prehistoric and modern man compared with prehistoric animals from Amabel Williams-Ellis and F. J. Fisher, *A History of English Life – Political and Social* (1937: 30).

**Figure 11:** Wilma Hickson, 'In this chart the number of people are suggested by the size of the figures – each share of the National income is shown by the number of treasure boxes' from Amabel Williams-Ellis and F. J. Fisher, *A History of English Life – Political and Social* (1937: 125). The statistics are presented in a way that is difficult to read, lacking a coherent visual strategy for the presentation of data.

**Figure 12:** Wilma Hickson, 'Abbeys and Monasteries' from Amabel Williams-Ellis and F. J. Fisher, *A History of English Life – Political and Social* (1937: 99).

**Figure 13:** Otto Neurath, Marie Neurath and anonymous, 'A century of inventions living in the world', from *A Visual History of Mankind* (1948b: 13–14). Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading.

### **Contributor details**

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See also the ‘Women in Print’ network (<https://womeninprintnetwork.wordpress.com/>), and the conference *Enid Marx and her Contemporaries* held at Compton Verney in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> It reads,

The new educational opportunities must not, therefore, be of a single pattern. Schools and courses must be available to suit the needs and aptitudes of different types of pupil or student. It is just as important to achieve diversity as it is to ensure equality of educational opportunity. Unity within the educational system will open the way to a more closely knit society which will give us strength to face the tasks ahead. (Board of Education 1943: 1)